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AUTHOR Moore, Rock
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ABSTRACT

The number of students failing in school has risen drastically in the past few years. Because of this, many educators are revisiting traditional practices and infusing effective tools that can enhance and promote literacy skills for all students. This process requires not only that teachers integrate content, but also that they elucidate the students' cognitive abilities in processing and decoding messages within the classroom context and environment. The paper addresses some of the methodologies for accomplishing these goals, and makes suggestions to help teachers involve students actively in classroom discussions and implement other nontraditional pedagogies to promote and sustain an ambiance of learning within the classroom. A responsive pedagogy derived from cognitive, social, and contextual constructivist perspectives would use students' present knowledge and experiences as a foundation for new learning. A classroom pedagogy that focuses on empowering students and creating a culture of learning will have a positive impact on all individuals concerned in the classroom today and as contributors and leaders of society tomorrow. (Contains 26 references.) (SLD)

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CREATING A CULTURE OF LEARNING FOR DIVERSE STUDENT POPULATIONS

submitted by

Rock Moore, Ed.D.
Assistant Professor
Teacher Education
Curriculum and Instruction
College of Education
Fort Hays State University
Hays, KS 67601

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TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

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Abstract

The number of students failing in school has risen drastically in the past few years.. Because of this many educators are revisiting traditional practices and infusing effective tools that can enhance and promote literacy skills for all students. This process requires teachers not only to integrate content but also to elucidate the students' cognitive abilities in processing and decoding messages within the classroom context and environment. This paper will address some of these methodologies and make suggestions for teachers to actively involve students in classroom discussions and other non-traditional pedagogies to promote and sustain an ambiance of learning within the classroom.

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Introduction

Schools are places of culture in that they create a sense of community, spirit, and common performance undertakings or enterprises. A micro representation of the school culture exist in each classroom. With this in mind, a classroom culture consist of a system of understanding that includes the students and teachers values, beliefs, and notions. This culture embraces acceptable and unacceptable behavior as well as verbal and non-verbal academic performance standards and expectations (Garcia, 1994).

All classrooms have a distinctive culture for teaching and learning. Therefore, characteristics that promote a positive environment for acquiring knowledge in the classroom can usually be observed in the manner in which students and teachers interact. It is also reflected in their expectations of one another, classroom discourse, and a shared understanding of what is acceptable within the academic classroom environment (Tishman, Perkins, Jay, 1995).

Reflection

For this reason, many contemporary teachers are critically analyzing their classroom pedagogy. These teachers are deliberating on their classroom activities and actions with open-mindedness and sincerity to maximize an environment that promotes learning. This cogitative process, by the teacher, is called reflectivity. Accordingly, Dewey (1933) defines reflectivity or reflection by the teacher as the "active persistent and careful consideration of any belief or supposed form of knowledge in light of the grounds that support it" (p. 9). Dewey's definition implies that if teachers are active and contemplative individuals, they will be continually searching for solutions that accentuate a learning culture in their classrooms. These teachers will not be satisfied with simple answers or educational clichés on why students from diverse psycho-social and linguistic settings are not achieving academic success. The reflective teacher will constantly seek

better ways to teach, manage, and organize their instructional strategies regardless of their students ethnic and cultural backgrounds.

Consequently, the reflective teacher will muse on ways to create a classroom atmosphere that accelerates learning and promotes the greatest potential for all students involved. Thus, one of the ways to accomplish this would be to build and promote a culture of learning within the classroom. As a result, a classroom ambiance which emphasizes several factors–languages, values, expectations, and habits, would be working together to express and reinforce the enterprise of good thinking and learning (Tishman, Perkins, Jay, 1995).

Enculturation

Similarly, promoting a culture of learning in the classroom includes the dynamics of enculturation. Enculturation in this sense is defined as the process whereby individuals are conditioned by, adjusted to, and integrated with the cultural norms prevalent in the classroom in which they are members. According to Tishman et el.(1995), the four cultural forces of enculturation are modeling, explanation, interaction, and feedback (p. 13).

Modeling strengthens the classroom culture by utilizing examples, demonstrations, or illustrations done by both the teacher and students. This involves enhancing vocabulary and visual stimuli that promotes and accelerates an interest in the topic or concept being learned.

Explanation augments the classroom culture by guiding the students through the use of direct instruction, brainstorming, or a combination of peer tutoring and contextualized problem solving. This process allows the students the opportunity to utilize information obtained in previous discourse to understand all sorts of written and verbal material. Mastery or understanding of words, topic, and concepts instead of exposure to these same topics is the main thrust of the explanation component.

Interaction is an excellent way to enhanced learning in the classroom culture. Interaction involves thoughtful and reflective dialogue with others. This promotes many new ideas because the affective filter is lowered creating a stress-free learning environment

The final way that enculturation promotes a culture of learning is through feedback. Feedback occurs as the teacher supports the students efforts with positive praise or prompts that promotes student motivation. Success at each step increases motivation that continues to intensify the students desire to learn.

The Framework

A framework for promoting a culture of learning as well as addressing the literacy skills needed by students in a diverse classroom would include three distinct yet analogous components. The three elements or sections that make up this paragon are the constructivist perspective, the utilization of instructional discourse, and the application of active teaching behaviors.

Constructivist

The constructivist theory is rooted in the idea that humans learn through a process of building and rebuilding. Students come to know a new concept by applying knowledge of previous ideas to the new information that they are given. "Understanding is based on the reconstruction of meaning. Such reconstruction is based on previous experience, familiarity with concepts, and a general understanding of language" (Morrow, 1993, p. 66).

The cognitive constructivist acknowledges that students come to school with some constructed knowledge about many things and that the students development is directly related to the classroom culture. Piaget and Inhelder (1969) findings indicate that students intellectual developments are refined and promoted by actions and events the learners have experienced in the classroom. Their intellectual development is facilitated in a positive manner through activities that utilize touching, tasting, hearing, seeing, and

smelling. Furthermore, Piaget (1973) states that knowledge should always be viewed as a constructive process in that the students build their knowledge from their sensory input.

In addition, Dewey (1916) states that "education is not an affair of telling and being told, but an active and constructive process" (p. 46). Consequently, in the cognitive constructivist paradigm, the learner is viewed as having an active role in the process of constructing knowledge. Nevertheless, the focus is on the thought processes, perspectives, and understandings of the individual.

In addition to cognitive constructivist there are also the social and contextual constructivist. Their views differ from the cognitive constructivist in some important ways. For example, the cognitive constructivist views of learning suggest that the student constructs knowledge often with the tutelage of an expert. The social constructivist would describe the same event in its social context not in conjunction with or limited to an expert, educator, or specialist. According to the social constructivist framework, knowledge and reasoning are established in both the physical and social contexts of the classroom rather than occurring exclusively in an individuals mind (Marshal, 1990).

This viewpoint implies that the teacher needs to focus on the social context within which academic tasks are presented and within which academic cognition's are constructed. Green, Weade, and Graham, (1988) research found that teachers and students construct meaning through their interactions with each other and within and around classroom lessons. Likewise, the context of lessons and their instructional objectives are accomplished at higher academic performance levels through opportunities that are provided by classroom discourse between students, the teacher, and the interaction within a contextualized learning environment.

Conversely, the cognitive constructivist and other research has shown that students can learn independently without the aid of others (Marshal, 1990). However, collaborative social interaction can provide numerous advantages for all learners. When students learn in groups, the cognitive functions and multiple roles required to carry out various tasks can be displayed by different individuals and modeled for others to learn (Brown and Reeve, 1987). Another asset is the students ability to challenge misconceptions and misunderstandings about a lesson in a way that an individual teacher in a traditional setting would not be able to do. Finally, a group synergistic effect takes place with the students in areas of insight and the promoting of problem solving solution strategies (Brown, Collins, and Duguid, 1989). As a result, the dynamics of collaborative groups can create positive classroom norms where effort and intention to learn are valued. Likewise, this can further enhance the classroom culture thereby stimulating the learners' motivation to learn more (Ames and Ames, 1984).

Moreover, the constructivist perspective suggests for meaningful learning to occur, teachers need to create not only a cognitively challenging classroom but also a social and contextualized environment that provides opportunities for authentic activities. These authentic activities can create links to the world apart from the classroom—instead of the traditional decontextualized task that the students have trouble relating to (Moore, 1996).

Additionally, Robert White's (1959) research found that students like to do things that helped them gain a sense of mastery over their environment. He called this intrinsic need "effectance." By focusing the students' interest on the contextualized environment within the classroom, learning took place at an accelerated rate. This is accomplished by giving the students individual as well as social task that has relevance and meaning to the topics introduced (Moore, 1996).

So then, a responsive pedagogy coming out of the cognitive, social, and contextual constructivist perspective would utilize the students present knowledge and experiences as a foundation for appropriating new learning. This would entail using classroom instructional strategies that incorporate the students' values, beliefs, and previous knowledge within a socially interactive classroom atmosphere.

Classroom Discourse

The second portion of this framework is called classroom or instructional discourse. Specifically, Garcia's (1989) research examined instructional discourse in effective classrooms that served various sociocultural and linguistically diverse populations. The study observed and analyzed the instructional styles of kindergarten, third, and fifth grade teachers whose students enjoyed academic success. Garcia's results indicate that:

1. Teachers promoted a classroom environment that encouraged student responses.
2. Once the teacher started a lesson, students were allowed to add ideas and input as well as illicit other students responses.

Garcia's findings indicate that teachers were clearly allowing student-student interaction within the classroom. It also suggests that classroom discourse strategies that emphasize student-student interaction can positively enhance academic development.

Moreover, effective instructional discourse has been demonstrated as highly relevant to the broader social, cognitive, and academic development of all students (Garcia, 1992). Therefore, instructional discourse promotes learning and takes advantage of spontaneous interactions which typically is not associated with a traditional or conventional classroom setting (Tharp and Gallimore, 1989).

Furthermore, the student discourse within this classroom format center on ideas and concepts. The conversation allows for the utilization of critical thinking skills and high levels of student participation without undue domination by the teacher. For this reason, the teacher presents provocative ideas or experiences, then strategically questions, prods, challenges, and coaxes the discussion to the desired outcome or learning objectives.

Additionally, according to Vygotsky (1978), students learn higher mental functions by internalizing social relationships. He describes a zone of proximal development, a range of social interaction between a teacher and student. The student can only perform within this range with the help of a teacher. Proximal development ends when the student can function independently. In the same way, Sulzby's (1986) research found that to promote language development, adults needed to interact with children by encouraging, motivating, and supporting them.

Likewise, Rogoff (1990) suggests that this classroom discourse is very similar to interactions that take place between adults and children outside of school. This research concluded that these interactions appear to be very important for children's learning and cognitive development, especially in developing advanced linguistic, thinking, and communicative skills.

As a result, Goldenburg (1992) has defined ten common characteristics associated with classroom discourse. The first five are instructional and include:

1. Integrative or thematic focus. This is used as the central theme for focusing discussions and the contextualization of the classroom environment.
2. Scaffolding and use of background information.

Teacher provides background information for promoting understanding as well as connectiveness to students previous learning.

3. Limiting the use of direct teaching. Use instructional strategies that promote active student involvement.

4. Increase academic language concepts and expression. Teacher obtains protracted student contributions using a variety of verbal prompts-e.g., questions, restatements, pauses, and invitations to expand.

5. Teacher promotes contextualization of students ideas through the use of text, pictures, and reasoning to support argument or position.

The next five are the conversational elements.

6. Fewer "known-answer" questions. Discussions center on topics for which there are more than one correct response. Actively promotes critical and reflective thinking strategies by the students.

7. Teacher is responsive and considerate to students' statements yet keeps discussion focused to accomplish instructional objectives.

8. Connected discourse. Discussion is characterized by multiple, interactive, connected turns; succeeding utterances building upon previous ones. Put another way, all topics can be integrated into other avenues of learning or opportunities to alternatively teach a concept.

9. Challenging non-threatening atmosphere. Challenging atmosphere balanced by positive affective climate. Teacher is more collaborator than evaluator. Conversely, the teacher still has the ultimate authority in the classroom.

10. General participation, including self-selected turns. Teacher encourages general participation among students. Teacher does not hold exclusive rights on who gets to speak.

In summary, the basis of enhanced academic productivity for the diverse students lies in the manner in which teachers allow classroom discourse in conjunction with the literacy activities. The lessons and assignments need to be organized in the classroom in ways that promote and enhance the intellectual and academic development of the various learners'.

Active/Action Teaching

The third and final element of this framework is called the active or action teaching component. Specifically, action teaching contains a set of instructional features identified as characteristics of effective teachers.

According to Garcia (1994), for a classroom teacher to be considered effective two criteria had to be met: (a)teachers had to be nominated by their peers, administrators, parents, or students; (b) their teaching practices had to produce rates of academic learning equal to or higher than rates reported in other research on effective teaching.

Likewise, other research (Moore, 1996; Garcia, 1992; Villegas, 1991) has focused on active teaching practices. These studies analyzed teachers who were consistently identified at the level of the school site and the district as effective. In these classrooms, approximately 50-70 percent of the students were either limited or non-English speakers, and the remaining fluent English speakers represented several different ethnic groups.

Concerning the organization and delivery of instruction by these effective teachers, Garcia (1994) found:

1. The teachers specified the instructional and performance outcomes to the students and the requirements to accomplish those objectives. The teachers also communicated high expectations for students in terms of learning and a confidence in the pupils that they could achieve those requirements. In fact, most teachers had a higher belief in the students abilities than the students themselves.
2. These effective teachers used active teaching strategies which showed a positive relationship to increased student performance on academic assessment test.

Specifically, active teaching behaviors focus on four areas:

1. The teacher communicates instructions clearly and in an easy to follow format. This includes giving accurate directions, specifying task and measurements; presenting new information by explaining, outlining,

summarizing, and rewriting.

2. Teacher seeks to obtain and maintain engagement. The teacher is actively involved in the activities of the students within the classroom. Purpose is to sustain the focus to the specific task, pace instruction appropriately, and communicate expectations for successful performance.

3. Teacher continually monitors student progress reducing stress and anxiety. Work is reviewed frequently and adjustments are made with instruction to maximize accuracy and understanding.

4. Teacher provides immediate and authentic feedback. This helps students achieve success or gives them access to information that will guide them to a successful outcome.

To sum up, a pedagogy for active learning has some primary assumptions. The first is that learning is by its nature an interactive process between the teacher and learner. The second is that different students learn in many distinct ways. Thirdly, the process of education is about self-development and learning is only meaningful when learners have taken knowledge and made it their own. Piaget (1976) states that "children do not receive knowledge passively but rather discover and construct knowledge through activities" (p. 119). As students interact with their psychological and physical environments, they begin to form structures of thought. These structures help to organize the students' experience and direct future interactions.

Traditional Classroom Pedagogy

Equally important to this framework is the teachers view of their role as a classroom instructor. The traditional pedagogical model of education is defined as a set of beliefs and ideologies about teaching. This concept is historically based on assumptions about teaching and learning brought over from Europe by the Puritans and other early settlers (Knowles, 1990). The traditional model assigns to the teacher full responsibility for making all decisions about what, how, when, and if anything has been learned. It is

solely teacher-directed. It leaves to the student only the submissive role of following instructions. It is based on the following assumptions about students:

1. What needs to be known. Students only need to know what information that the teacher teaches. It is this information that will allow them to pass and be promoted. The students do not need to understand how this information will apply to their lives in school or outside of it for that matter.

2. Student's self-concept. The student is dependent on the teachers view of them. Therefore, the students self-concept eventually becomes that of a dependent personality. The learner is dependent on the teacher for all academic learning outcomes.

3. Role of students' previous experience. The students experience is of little worth as a resource for learning: the experience that counts is that of the teacher, the textbook writer, and the audio-visual aids producer. Therefore, transmittal techniques—lectures, assigned readings, etc. are the backbone of pedagogical methodology. The students ability to cognitively connect to classroom information is irrelevant.

4. Readiness to learn. Students become ready to learn what the teacher tells them they must learn if they want to pass and be promoted. When it nine o'clock it time to write, at ten it time for social studies etc. Grade level expectations determine the students accepted readiness level.

5. Orientation to learning. Students have a subject-centered orientation to learning; they see learning as acquiring subject-matter content. Therefore, learning experiences are organized according to logic of the subject-matter content. The use of contextualizing a classroom environment is not an important aspect of this pedagogical perspective.

6. Motivation. Learners are motivated to learn by external motivators—grades, the teacher's approval or disapproval, or parental pressures. There is very little internal stimuli that prompt the student to learn. National

curve equivalencies and grade level expectations are suppose to be the motivating factors for these students.

Conversely, Glasser's (1968, 1975, 1986, 1992) research on motivation found that all individuals tend to be energized and enthusiastic with activities that involve the concepts of fun, freedom, love, power, and survival. Many of these aspects can be incorporated into a classroom to engage students in learning activities. Similarly, Bartolome's (1994) study found that instead of looking for a right or perfect teaching strategy, a pedagogy that uses the students reality, history, and perspectives would promote an ambiance conducive to learning.

Non-Traditional Classroom Pedagogy

Therefore, a non traditional pedagogy that promotes a culture of learning in the classroom would be based on the following assumptions:

1. What needs to be known. Students need to understand why they are learning something. They need to comprehend the bigger picture. When this is accomplished the student will expend the energy necessary to get the assignment or lesson done.
2. Students' self-concept. The student becomes more responsible in the decision making process. They are developing psychologically the ability to become self-directive. They are not passive but active in their approach in getting task done. This is an ongoing process as students progress from dependent to self-directed learners.
3. Role of students' previous experience. It is important to connect with the student in a way that brings about motivation (constructivist concepts). Emphasis in the classroom is on academic achievement as well as group discussions, problem-solving activities, and other peer-helping activities. This is in direct contrast to the use of transmittal techniques that allow the students to be passive instead of active learners.

4. Readiness to learn. Students become ready to learn when they see how information applies outside of the classroom setting. As students pass from one developmental stage to another, its important to give them greater responsibility. It is not necessary to sit by passively and wait for the students to progress naturally. Through a contextualized environment, an atmosphere can be created that fosters accelerated intellectual development by utilizing the students curiosity of the world around them.

5. Orientation to learning. Students are motivated to the extent that they perceive that the knowledge, skills, and values have purpose beyond the school setting. A culture of learning is more than vocabulary list, math work sheets, and various writing assignments. By integrating topic and themes the students will see the connections between various subjects as well as the school and community environments.

6. Motivation. Instead of external factors, internal motivation comes from within. The student gets real satisfaction and a sense of accomplishment in academic task that are well done. Their self-concept is reinforced which inturn provides drive to take more initiative and to become more self-directed. The students learn to learn.

Thus, by providing a classroom culture in which the students feel respected and cared about, a climate for literacy is promoted. By exposing the students to the need to know before instructing them; by giving them some responsibility in choosing methods and resources; and by involving them in sharing responsibility for evaluating their learning—positive and effective learning can and will take place (Knowles, 1990). Therefore, with these assumption in mind, Dewey (1916) asked a paramountly question: "Why is it, in spite of the fact that teaching by pouring in, learning by a passive absorption, are universally condemned but so entrenched in practice? (p. 46). This is still a question that needs to be assessed and evaluated in each of our classrooms today.

Conclusion

Therefore, promoting a culture of learning in the classroom entails many different aspects. It involves the process of enculturation. Within this overarching paragon is the constructivist model of learning, the classroom strategies associated with classroom discourse, and the effective teaching behaviors regarding organization and delivery analogous with active teaching. Finally, reflecting on the pedagogical assumptions concerning the role of the teacher as well as the students needs to be addressed. Together, these methodologies and strategies can form a solid and balanced learning environment. Everything done in the classroom should contribute to creating an assuring ambiance which encourages and motivates the students to assume greater control over their learning style which can promote academic success.

In summary, all students can be taught and served effectively. Any student regardless of his or her ethnicity, socioeconomic or linguistic background can achieve successful academic levels at or above the national norm (Moore, 1996). Creating not only a culture of learning, but one where students are expected and believe that they can succeed is a decisive step in creating a literate and challenging school culture. A classroom pedagogy that focuses on empowering the students and creating a culture of learning will have a positive impact on all individuals concerned both in the classroom today, and as contributors and leaders of society tomorrow.

Biography

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